

Important Distinctions

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Important Distinctions

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Summary

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Jingyi said, “Hanguang-jun would like to respectfully state that he thinks you are a punk-ass bitch.”

“Lan Jingyi!” another Lan disciple hissed, horrified.

“He said it with his eyes,” Jingyi protested. “It’s Expression 321.”

Sizhui fished the book out of his qiankun pouch and flipped through it.

One of the Ouyang junior disciples sidled over to him and peered over his shoulder. “There really is a book.”

Notes

Also for [Jay](#), my other Aroha discord friend who helped bring this story to life.

Some of the dialogue in the story comes directly from our discord chat.

See the end of the work for [more notes](#)

- Translation into Русский available: [Важные различия](#) by [Alre_Snow](#), [Greykite](#), [WTF Modao Zushi 2022 \(fandom_Wei_Wuxian_and_Co\)](#)

Sizhui found the book when he was five and had first moved into the Jingshi. Father had been summoned to assist Uncle with Clan business and had trusted Sizhui to ready himself for the day, and Sizhui couldn't find his Ribbon, so he'd gone looking for a spare and found, in a lacquer box in Father's room, a plain book.

He'd lifted the book aside to search for a ribbon and found a faded red one and the book had fallen open - to a picture of Father.

Father was younger in the picture, and he was smiling.

Sizhui had seen Father smile. Sort of. Never like that before.

There was writing beneath the picture. Sizhui was good at reading, recognized numbers - Seventeen - but the other characters were still beyond him. He had a lot of catching up to do, even with Father and Uncle helping him extra, because he'd been very sick before.

Curious, Sizhui flipped through the other pages in the book. They were all pictures of Father, with numbers and writing beneath them. In some pictures he was frowning; in others he was smiling.

And then Sizhui heard the breakfast gong, and he put the red ribbon back and book on top of it and closed the box. He had to get to the breakfast hall with the other children, but there was no running allowed. He would be punished for having no ribbon, but at least he'd have breakfast.

In the furor that followed - no ribbon, late for breakfast, stomach growling all through morning classes - Sizhui forgot about the book.

Sizhui found the book again when he was ten and supposed to be supervising discipline for Lan Jingyi, who'd spoken during lunch, shouted between classes, and also run in the courtyard.

"We're supposed to go to the library," Lan Jingyi said but followed when Sizhui led him to the Jingshi.

"I need some study supplies, since we'll be in the library for a while," Sizhui said.

Great Uncle had ordered Lan Jingyi to copy the Lan Sect rules (four thousand of them) in their entirety.

"All right."

For all that Lan Jingyi was rather un-Lannish, he was generally quite agreeable.

"So this is where the great Hanguang-jun lives." Lan Jingyi paused on the threshold of the Jingshi, hesitant.

“You can come in,” Sizhui said. “It’s just a home, same as everyone else’s.”

It really wasn’t grander than anyone else’s, because ostentation was forbidden in the Cloud Recesses.

Lan Jingyi was still very cautious as he tiptoed through the Jingshi while Sizhui gathered some books, brushes, and ink supplies. His caution didn’t last long, and soon he was poking through a lacquer box.

“Hey, what’s this?” He held up a book.

Sizhui turned. It had no title.

“It’s...pictures of Hanguang-jun,” Lan Jingyi said, flipping through it. “He looks younger. But - look at this.”

He turned the book around for Sizhui to see.

It was a portrait of Father wearing one of his trademark stern expressions for when someone - usually Lan Jingyi - spoke during meals.

“‘Number Seven: No speaking during meals’,” Lan Jingyi read. His eyes went wide. “This really is the face he makes!”

Sizhui crowded close and flipped to the next page. “‘Number Seven part two: You already know no speaking during meals but it is not worth repeating.’”

“Wow. These are really accurate,” Lan Jingyi said, flipping through several more pages. “I wonder who drew these.”

“Possibly Uncle,” Sizhui said, because who else knew Father that well but would also create such a thing? Certainly not Great Uncle.

“Zewu-jun might,” Lan Jingyi agreed. “The book isn’t finished, though. There are only three hundred and eighty entries. Your father has far more expressions than that, surely.”

“Everyone does,” Sizhui agreed.

“Too bad neither of us are very good at drawing.” Lan Jingyi sighed. “We could add more.”

“Should we add more?” Sizhui asked.

“In case people besides you and Zewu-jun and Grand Master want to communicate with him,” Lan Jingyi said. “In an emergency or something.”

Sizhui considered. “Maybe later. Put that back. We should be in the library.”

Lan Jingyi looked disappointed, but he nodded and replaced the book in the box and closed the box, and together he and Sizhui headed for the library.

Sizhui thought about that book often in the years that followed, would take it out of the box and handle it carefully, study the drawings in it, impressed with their accuracy and amused by the captions for each expression. Whoever had drawn the images had known his father well and studied him closely, had spent much time with him and been close enough to him to see him in many moods and states - including drunk, if such a thing was to be believed. There was even a section just on the angles of his father's brow and what each meant, which was both amusing and fascinating for its detail.

Judging by the hair ornament in the pictures and the decorations on his father's robe, his father had been young when the pictures were drawn, just a senior clan disciple.

There were expressions missing from the catalogue, however.

While an entire section was dedicated to Father playing the guqin, not included was the look on his face he got when he played a certain melody that neither Uncle nor Great Uncle knew the name of.

And there were no instances of the deep longing Father would get on his face when he glimpsed a jar of Emperor's Smile and, instead of spluttering and becoming angry like Great Uncle and assigning copying, he'd just look lost.

In the old pictures, Father didn't wear nearly as much white, and he didn't look like he *missed* someone, someone whose name no one ever said, someone whose presence pervaded every corner of the Cloud Recesses, whose memory could be recalled with a hint of spices or laughter or dizi music.

(Sizhui suspected it was his mother. He'd heard other people whisper about how Hanguang-jun was constantly in mourning and had never entertained, not even as briefly as a candle in the wind, the notion of taking a wife to be mother to his son. Maybe she was the one who'd started the book? It would explain why Father was young in the pictures, and why it was incomplete, and why it did not contain his profound sadness - and also many of the smiles that were just for Sizhui.)

For all that Sizhui considered the book often, he never did make any attempts to master the artistic skill to update it. He knew his father treasured the book, so he made sure to handle it carefully, and he cast some preserving spells on it for good measure.

Sizhui had less time to consider the book as he and Jingyi and his other yearmates prepared for their examinations and assessments in order to qualify for night hunts, and when the time finally arrived for them to leave Cloud Recesses under Father's guidance, Sizhui was excited and nervous. Night hunts were adventures, but he also had to do well and bring his clan and his family honor.

Sizhui was in the Jingshi packing supplies, Jingyi reading off the suggested supply list - signal shells, spell talismans, spare strings for his guqin - when Uncle stopped in to speak to him.

"Sizhui, Lan Jingyi."

“Uncle.” Sizhui bowed.

Jingyi bowed. “Zewu-jun.”

“On night hunts, disciples from other sects will be present, so you must represent the clan with honor,” Uncle said, which was what Great Uncle and their other teachers had also said, but they nodded obediently.

“There is also the likelihood that people like Sect Leader Jiang will be out on training hunts, leading their own young disciples,” Uncle said.

Jingyi nodded, wide-eyed. They’d all heard of the legendary Sandu Sengshou, who’d killed the Yiling Patriarch himself.

“Lan Zhan won’t talk to Jiang Wanyin,” Uncle said to Sizhui. “At all. As in - not a single word. And since Jiang Wanyin is the leader of the Yunmeng Jiang, I’ll need you to be diplomatic. For our sect. Do you understand?”

Sizhui nodded. “Yes, Uncle.”

“Try to be as accurate as possible,” Uncle said.

Sizhui nodded again but didn’t like the gleam in Jingyi’s eye.

At all.

Uncle smiled. “Thank you, Sizhui, Lan Jingyi. I knew you’d understand. Good luck on your first night hunt.”

They both bowed, and Uncle departed.

As soon as he was out of earshot, Jingyi said, “The book. We need the book.”

Sizhui nodded. “I’ll go get it.”

He wrapped it in oiled cloth for safekeeping and tucked it into his qiankun pouch along with his guqin, and then he assembled with the rest of his yearmates at the main gates. Once Father arrived, he did a silent headcount, and they set off on their swords to the site of their first night hunt.

For the most part, the night hunt was going as Sizhui had expected: they interviewed the villagers about where suspicious activity was occurring, determined that resentful ghosts were the cause of the problem, and did further investigating as to the identities of the deceased to see if they could lay the dead to rest to send the spirits on their way peacefully.

As Uncle had predicted, they ran into disciples from a couple of other sects out on training hunts, the Baling Ouyang Sect and the Pingyang Yao Sect. Sizhui noted the deep purple robes of the Ouyang Sect - deeper than the purple of the Yunmeng Jiang, which also featured a lighter blue - and the black robes of the Yao Sect.

The senior disciple with the Yao Sect bowed and said, “What an honor it is, to see the great Hanguang-jun on a night hunt again. Or is he, perhaps, searching for something?”

“Or...someone?” the senior Ouyang Sect disciple chimed in, also bowing low but not lowering his gaze.

The other Yao and Ouyang junior disciples bowed but cast each other questioning looks, because they hadn’t missed the snideness in the senior disciples’ tones.

Sizhui and Jingyi and their fellow disciples bowed as well.

Father arched an eyebrow and said nothing.

Sizhui darted a glance at him, lifted his head, and said, “Hanguang-jun is leading us junior disciples on our first night hunt, as is his responsibility as senior disciple.”

He was always careful to refer to his father by his title when they were outside the Cloud Recesses or when any outer disciple was present or really when anyone who wasn’t close family was present, which was pretty much all the time.

“Then Hanguang-jun has already discovered the source of the village’s unrest and will sort it out himself,” the Yao senior disciple said.

Father raised both eyebrows and frowned.

Jingyi piped up, “Hanguang-jun would never overstep his bounds and deprive us junior disciples of a valuable learning experience.”

The Ouyang senior disciple said, “Does Hanguang-jun not speak to us himself?” He glared at Father.

Father looked away from him deliberately.

Several of the Ouyang senior disciples twitched for their swords. The junior disciples looked nervous.

Jingyi lifted his chin. “Hanguang-jun would like to remind you that you are a two and he is a ten and you are not qualified to speak to him.”

The Ouyang senior disciple spluttered. “You’re putting words in his mouth.”

Jingyi said, “I am not. It’s in the book.”

The Yao senior disciple jabbed a finger at Father. “You’re pathetic, letting children fight your battles for you.”

Father arched an eyebrow and lifted his chin.

Jingyi said, “Hanguang-jun would like to respectfully state that he thinks you are a punk-ass bitch.”

“Lan Jingyi!” another Lan disciple hissed, horrified.

“He said it with his eyes,” Jingyi protested. “It’s Expression 321.”

Sizhui fished the book out of his qiankun pouch and flipped through it.

One of the Ouyang junior disciples sidled over to him and peered over his shoulder. “There really is a book.”

“Who are you?” Jingyi demanded.

“Ouyang Zizhen,” he said, bowing.

“The sect heir,” one of the other Lan disciples hissed, and Jingyi bowed hastily.

“Actually,” Sizhui said, holding the book out for Jingyi and Ouyang Zizhen to see, “that was more like Expression 322, which is to be interpreted as, ‘you are a *weak ass bitch*.’”

“Ah,” Jingyi said, nodding. “Not punk.”

Sizhui closed the book and tucked it back into his qiankun pouch. “It’s an important distinction.”

The Ouyang and Yao senior disciples gaped at them.

Father’s expression remained impassive, Expression 201, ‘And now what?’

Ouyang Zizhen cleared his throat. “Does that book have *every* single one of his expressions?”

“Unfortunately no, since I’m not an artist and I haven’t been able to update it since the original author stopped,” Sizhui said in a low voice.

“I’m a pretty good artist,” Ouyang Zizhen said. “What’s that one?” He nodded at Father.

“Expression Thirty-three, ‘Hurry up already.’” Sizhui cleared his throat and bowed.

“Apologies, Hanguang-jun.”

Jingyi said to the rest of the Lan junior disciples, “Let us proceed to the village burial ground and observe whether any graves or burial offerings have been disturbed.”

The Ouyang senior disciple, perhaps taking his cue from the sect heir who was unoffended by Jingyi, managed to collect himself enough to rally the other Ouyang junior disciples, and the night hunt continued without incident.

By the end of the night, the resentful spirits had been laid to rest, the village was safe, and Sizhui and Jingyi and their yearmates were more experienced cultivators for it. They assembled at the edge of the village, prepared to mount their swords and return to the Cloud Recesses.

“It was an honor to hunt alongside you,” Ouyang Zizhen said, bowing.

His senior disciple spluttered but didn't actually say anything, since he was the sect heir.

"And you as well," Sizhui said, bowing respectfully.

"Maybe we'll see you again when you come to the Cloud Recesses for lectures," Jingyi added.

Ouyang Zizhen straightened up. "Oh, we're a very small sect. We're never invited to that kind of thing."

Sizhui turned to Father. "Hanguang-jun?"

Father inclined his head a fraction.

Sizhui said, "The heir of the Baling Ouyang Sect would be welcome at the Cloud Recesses for lectures."

Ouyang Zizhen smiled. "I'll bring my paintbrushes."

And he did. He proved both a talented cultivator - and an impressive artist. Besides Sizhui and Jingyi, he was the only person who was allowed to examine The Book, and even then only under strict conditions - in Jingyi's quarters, since Sizhui wasn't sure how Father would feel about outsiders in the Jingshi.

When they weren't studying or training, they were working on The Book.

"Hang on," Zizhen said one day, while Sizhui and Jingyi were doing extra guqin practice.

"What's wrong?" Sizhui asked.

"Did you damage The Book?" Jingyi scrambled over to the desk immediately.

Zizhen rolled his eyes. "No. But come see. This expression right here, 173, captioned 'I Like Mian Mian'."

Sizhui nodded. He'd always wondered if Mian Mian was his mother but had never dared ask.

Zizhen flipped to another page. "It's the same as Number Three 'You're an idiot'."

Jingyi frowned. "What?"

Zizhen flipped back and forth so they could compare. "See? Exactly the same."

Sizhui joined them at the desk. "How is that possible?"

"Well, 'You're an idiot' is definitely correct," Jingyi said.

Zizhen nodded his agreement.

"Hanguang-jun obviously doesn't really like Mian Mian, whoever she was," Jingyi said.

Not Sizhui's mother, then.

"All the other expressions are so accurate." Sizhui flipped back and forth, comparing, but they were definitely the same.

Zizhen said, "You know, some people are sometimes just really oblivious when someone likes them."

"What do you mean?" Jingyi asked.

"Whoever drew this must have been someone who Hanguang-jun liked," Zizhen said. "Seeing as how he treasures The Book so much. But she must not have realized he liked her back."

Jingyi and Sizhui exchanged looks. Zizhen didn't know that Sizhui was more than just the senior-most disciple among his year-mates.

"So when she asked him if he liked this Mian Mian person he must have made this face, but she, not believing he could ever like her back, must have mistaken his expression." Zizhen sighed dreamily. "Perhaps, for all her ability to read Hanguang-jun, she was never able to see past her own insecurity, and Hanguang-jun was never able to break past his own reticence, and eventually she moved on, unable to bear her own longing, and he was left with only this book and her memory."

Jingyi stared at him. "Are you writing a romance novel? We need you to update this reference text that is very important to Lan Sect diplomacy. Are you up to the task or not?"

Zizhen considered. "What's in it for me?"

Sizhui said, "The goodwill of our sect and, of course, unparalleled access to Hanguang-jun during your stay at the Cloud Recesses."

"Oh?" Zizhen raised his eyebrows.

A soft gong rang in the distance.

Sizhui rose. He said, "It's time for family supper."

"Family supper?" Zizhen asked.

"Yes, with Father, Uncle, Great Uncle, and Cousin Jingyi," Sizhui said, heading for the door.

Zizhen followed Jingyi and Sizhui across several courtyards, confused, though his eyes widened when Sizhui led him to Uncle's quarters.

"Zewu-jun." Zizhen bowed respectfully.

Uncle greeted him. "Ouyang Zizhen, welcome."

Sizhui bowed. "Uncle, I spoke to you earlier about having Cousin Jingyi and Ouyang Zizhen with me at family dinners during the lectures sometimes."

Uncle smiled. "Of course. Your friends are always welcome, Sizhui."

Sizhui said, "Ouyang Zizhen is a talented artist and is helping us with an important project."

"Excellent. I am glad to see such cooperation between the sects so early on. If only your elders had learned to do the same." Uncle's smile turned a little sad, but then he ushered them into his quarters.

Great Uncle arrived next, and finally Father.

Zizhen's eyes were wide. "Hanguang-jun!" He bowed.

Father inclined his head politely and took his seat between Uncle and Sizhui.

"Sizhui," he said.

"Father."

Father, Zizhen mouthed, eyes wide.

Jingyi nudged him.

For once, the Lan rule against conversation at meal times was a boon, so everyone could eat without trying to talk, and after, everyone went their separate ways.

On the way back to the student dorms, Zizhen pounced.

"Hanguang-jun is your *father*?"

Sizhui nodded.

"But he - he's never been married...?"

"I'm adopted," Sizhui said.

"Who's your mother?"

Jingyi hissed and swatted at Zizhen, who dodged nimbly.

Sizhui said, "I think she's the one who made The Book."

Zizhen's eyes went wide. "Oh. Oh! Well...invite me to a few more dinners and family things and I'll see what I can do."

After that, Jingyi and Zizhen and Sizhui were nearly inseparable. When Sizhui accompanied Father to the library to assist him with research, the other two were with him. When Sizhui

had sword tutorials with Uncle and Father, Jingyi and Zizhen tagged along. When Sizhui helped Father tend to the rabbits, Jingyi and Zizhen helped too.

“I thought there was a rule about no pets?” Zizhen whispered as he scattered cabbage leaves among a crowd of fluffy white bodies.

“They’re not pets,” Jingyi said.

“What are they?” Zizhen whispered back.

“They just...are.” Jingyi shrugged.

“They’re meditation aids,” Sizhui said.

Zizhen stared at him. Sizhui nodded to where Father was sitting in the grass, playing his guqin, surrounded by rabbits falling over themselves trying to climb on him.

“Oh,” Zizhen said, his eyes sparkling with tears. “I think that’s the most adorable thing I’ve ever seen.”

He dropped the basket of cabbage leaves - it was immediately beset by bunnies - and whipped out The Book, his brushes, and a pot of ink, and set to work.

“That - oh. Oh. But his expression is so - *oh*.”

Father was playing Inquiry on his guqin. Sizhui knew he was seeking after a spirit whose name he never spoke, and that he would receive no answer.

The expression on his face was heartbreakingly sad.

“He’s going to be here for a while,” Jingyi said.

“Father, or Zizhen?”

“Both.” Jingyi sat and let a rabbit crawl into his lap.

Sizhui did the same.

By the time the lectures ended, The Book was nearly full and had nearly seven hundred entries, though some expressions had sub-parts. Zizhen had included a section on Father’s hands, for when he gripped the hilt of his sword but did not draw it or almost drew it or did draw it or sheathed it just so. Jingyi was incredibly observant, and Zizhen was an incredible artist. Jingyi was also incredibly saucy, and Sizhui had tried to get him to tone down the captions for the expressions, but Jingyi was insistent.

“Come on, we have to carry on the precedent set by the original author. Expression 655 is clearly ‘You can burn in the hell of a thousand fiery suns’.”

“Maybe just a hundred,” Sizhui suggested.

Zizhen shook his head. “Look at the angle of Hanguang-jun’s eyebrow, though.”

Sizhui considered the portrait. “Okay, fine.”

Zizhen was the best artist, but Sizhui had the best calligraphy, so he dutifully inscribed the caption.

“What are you going to do after I’m gone?” Zizhen asked.

“Hope Father learns no new expressions,” Sizhui said.

Zizhen burst into startled laughter. “You really are his son. You have that straight face and then say something so savage with just the barest shift of your eyebrows and - wow.”

“We’ll miss you,” Jingyi said.

Zizhen blinked at him. “Really?”

Jingyi nodded.

Zizhen said, “I bet I could figure out how the Lanling Jin send those butterfly messages and we could send each other messages that way.”

Jingyi lit up. “Really?”

Zizhen nodded.

Sizhui blotted the ink on the caption carefully, then held The Book out for inspection.
“Well?”

“Perfect,” Zizhen said.

“Perfect,” Jingyi agreed.

Sizhui closed The Book and cast a careful preserving charm on it.

“Here’s to future diplomacy between sects,” he said. He raised a cup of tea.

“Future diplomacy,” Zizhen said, and raised his own teacup.

Jingyi raised his teacup, and together they drank.

Sizhui made sure to always have The Book in his qiankun pouch when he went out on night hunts, but otherwise he kept it safe in the chest in the Jingshi. If Father had noticed the additions to it, he didn’t say, and if he minded, he didn’t say, so Sizhui said nothing either.

And then on a night hunt he and the other junior disciples encountered Mo Xuanyu, who was weak and a little mad but not unkind, and then they encountered him again and he was surprisingly adept at demonic cultivation and he was less mad and he played a broken, odd

version of a familiar tune that Father sometimes played, that neither Uncle nor Great Uncle knew the name of.

After that fraught encounter with the irritating and immature Jin Ling and the angry and violent Sandu Shengshou, Father surprised everyone by not only bringing Mo Xuanyu back to the Cloud Recesses but back to the Jingshi.

Given that Sizhui had been living in the dorms with his yearmates for a long time, he wasn't inconvenienced by Mo Xuanyu taking up a bed in the Jingshi, but he was very surprised by Father letting a total stranger into what amounted to their family home.

Rumor had it that Mo Xuanyu was one of Jin Guangshan's illegitimate sons and had been cast out of the Jin Sect and his golden core had been quite weak so he wasn't very skilled as a cultivator, and also he was quite mad and a cut-sleeve and wore face-paint (though he hadn't had any face-paint on beneath his mask).

And then it occurred to Sizhui. Was Father a cut-sleeve? It might explain why he'd never married.

But then...what about Sizhui's mother?

As far as anyone knew, Mo Xuanyu had never met Father before, so it wasn't like he and Father were former lovers.

But when he woke, he called Father *Lan Zhan*, and he spoke to Father with easy familiarity.

Father had servants bring him food, and he didn't look scolding once while Mo Xuanyu chatted during the meal. In fact, he looked fond.

Sizhui ate silently, listening.

"Ah, Lan Zhan, don't think I've forgotten. That's Expression 237, 'You're being silly but it's tolerable'." Mo Xuanyu smiled.

Sizhui glanced up at his father and nearly dropped his chopsticks.

Because it was. Expression 237. Straight out of The Book.

How did Mo Xuanyu *know*?

Over the next while, Sizhui observed Father and Mo Xuanyu, and Sizhui saw - new expressions. Variations on familiar ones, but with nuances he couldn't quite read. Expression 157, 'I'm glad you're here,' but overshadowed with tones of Expression 209 'I've missed you' and Expression 76 'It's been too long' and Expression 13 'I'm so relieved'. Father was fond of Mo Xuanyu in a way he wasn't fond of Uncle and Great Uncle and Sizhui.

But sometimes Father would get this look on his face, like he was afraid Mo Xuanyu would vanish if he left Father's sight.

Sizhui almost recognized that expression. Father had worn a similar expression, sometimes, when he'd looked at Sizhui, back when Sizhui was very young and had first come out of his terrible fever, like he was afraid Sizhui would leave.

And like Sizhui reminded him of someone, someone who made him very sad.

Sizhui filed those expressions away until the next time he could speak to Jingyi, but it would be no use till Zizhen was there with his brushes. Still, he could discuss his suspicions with Jingyi.

Gossip was forbidden in the Cloud Recesses. Important academic discussions, however, were not, and The Book was important to inter-sect diplomacy, so.

“So I think Mo Xuanyu wrote The Book.”

“*What?*”

Sizhui pressed a finger to Jingyi’s lips. He’d dragged Jingyi - in the most calm and dignified and Lan-like manner possible - into a private corner between a couple of buildings as soon as he could manage, which was right after Father and Mo Xuanyu had set off on their own after the whole incident with Great Uncle suffering a qi deviation trying to question the sword spirit from Mo Manor.

“No shouting in the Cloud Recesses,” Sizhui said automatically, which just made Jingyi roll his eyes, and Sizhui winced, because it made him sound like Great Uncle.

Jingyi cleared his throat, and Sizhui stepped back.

“What makes you think,” Jingyi said in a low, calm voice, “that Mo Xuanyu wrote the book?”

“He knows its contents,” Sizhui said. “By heart. Numbers and captions. I’ve never shown it to him. It’s in my qiankun pouch at all times. Father couldn’t have shown it to him.”

“But I thought your mother wrote The Book.”

“I did too.”

“Mo Xuanyu is a cut-sleeve.”

“Gossip is forbidden in the Cloud Recesses.”

Jingyi sighed. “There’s something else going on. I’ll write to Zizhen and see what he knows.”

Sizhui nodded. He hoped that whoever Mo Xuanyu was, he was a good person, because the way Father smiled - Sizhui had never seen him smile like that.

As it turned out, Mo Xuanyu wasn’t really Mo Xuanyu but was Wei Wuxian back from - the dead? Temporary spiritual suspension? A coma? No one was quite sure, not even Wei

Wuxian himself. But apparently Father had been in love with Wei Wuxian, the Yiling Patriarch himself, since they were Sizhui's age, and Sizhui was in fact actually Wen Yuan, had been rescued from certain death by Wei Wuxian once and then by Father, and now -

Now the world was turned upside down. The world knew Jin Guangyao had been the mastermind behind Jin Zixun and Jin Zixuan's deaths, that he'd used Su She and Xue Yuang to try to make a Yin Tiger Seal of his own, that he'd tried to position things so he'd not only be the leader of the Jin Sect but become the Chief Cultivator.

Now Jin Ling - who was not as annoying as he'd first seemed - was the leader of the Jin Sect, and Father was the new Chief Cultivator, and Wei Wuxian was his cultivation partner, and Nie Huaisang was also some kind of secret mastermind who'd manipulated Mo Xuanyu into bringing back Wei Wuxian so Nie Mingjue's murder at Jin Guangyao's hand could be avenged, and at the end of it all Jin Guangyao was dead and lots of other people were dead and Uncle - who'd been in love with Jin Guangyao all this time - was in seclusion.

Things were a mess.

But Father was happy, and he was trying to make things better, and with Uncle in Seclusion, Great Uncle had to step up as Sect Leader, and as senior-most disciple, Sizhui had to step up and help with clan affairs, and that meant accompanying Father to many meetings.

And assisting with diplomacy as needed.

"Hanguang-jun, you seem...displeased," Sect Leader Fu said.

Sizhui cleared his throat. "Hanguang-jun would like to respectfully state that you can burn in the hell of a hundred fiery suns."

Angry murmurs rose from the assembled sect leaders.

Sizhui ducked his head.

Zizhen cleared his throat. "The Book, if I may, Lan Sizhui."

Sizhui reached into his qiankun pouch and drew out The Book, surrendered it with a polite bow. "The Book, Ouyang Zizhen."

Jingyi clicked his tongue disapprovingly.

Zizhen opened The Book and flipped through the pages ostentatiously. "Expression 655 is to be correctly interpreted as 'You can burn in the hell of a thousand fiery suns.'"

Sect Leader Fu gaped.

"Apologies, Ouyang Zizhen," Sizhui said.

"It's an important distinction," Zizhen said virtuously. He closed The Book and handed it back.

Wei Wuxian, sitting beside Father, hid a giggle behind one hand.

Sect Leader Rong stabbed a finger at Zizhen. “How can you condone this nonsense?”

“I illustrated The Book, of course,” Zizhen said.

Sect Leader Rong shut his mouth so fast his teeth clicked.

Wei Wuxian raised his eyebrows. “Can I see this book?”

Sizhui bowed and held it out. “Of course, Wei Qianbei.”

Wei Wuxian held it carefully, but recognition crossed his face. “I - I made this book.”

Sizhui bowed. “Wei Qianbei started The Book, but it was incomplete, and in the interests of inter-sect diplomacy, Lan Jingyi, Ouyang Zizhen, and myself undertook to add to it, at Zewujun’s suggestion.”

Suggestion was stretching it a bit, but they weren’t in the Cloud Recesses right now.

Wei Wuxian said, “You have lovely calligraphy, Sizhui.”

Sizhui bowed again. “Thank you, Wei Qianbei.”

Sect Leader Jin cleared his throat. “About the Ghost General.”

Wen Ning, sitting on the sidelines in unnecessary chains but with a teacup in reach, lifted his head at the sound of his unfortunate title.

Father sighed.

Wei Wuxian handed The Book back to Sizhui.

Sizhui cleared his throat. “Seeing as how Wen Qionglin has managed to sit through this long and entirely pointless sect conference without murdering anyone, the suggestion that he is dangerous and uncontrollable is without merit and, therefore, anyone who suggests that he be put down like a rabid dog can burn in the hell of a thousand fiery suns.”

There was another uproar.

Father’s expression turned stony.

Lan Jingyi cleared his throat, leaned up on his toes, and yelled at the top of his lungs. “*Shut the hell up!*”

Shocked silence filled the hall at Golden Carp Tower.

Sizhui obediently flipped to Expression 482 and held it up for inspection.

People stared at the drawing, then at Father.

Father's expression smoothed out.

Sizhui said, "Let us proceed," and they did.

Back at the Cloud Recesses, Sizhui sat playing his guqin for the rabbits while Father and Wei Wuxian sat with the rabbits, Wei Wuxian playing with them while Father let them crawl all over him as he watched Wei Wuxian.

"You found that book."

"Mn."

"You *kept* it."

"You let A-Yuan and his friends write in it."

"Mn."

"You really *didn't* like Mian Mian."

"I did not."

"You really missed me."

"Loved you. Always."

"Well I'm here now. Always."

Sizhui looked away when they kissed. But he started to play the song that Father played sometimes, that had no name, and when he finally dared to look over at the two of them, they were both smiling, and they both looked happy.

One thousand, Sizhui thought. *No matter how many other expressions come in between, that smile, the one they share, will always be one thousand.*

End Notes

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